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DOES YOUR CHURCH BELIEVE IN CONVERSION?

A SERMON
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"Does Your Church Believe in Conversion?"

Being the last of a series of four sermons which seek to set forth again the faith that is in us and to answer specifically, as we should, these questions often put by inquiring minds which are seeking truth and spirit even as we are:

"Does Your Church Believe in God?"

"Does Your Church Believe in the Bible?"

"Does Your Church Believe in the Divinity of Christ?"

"Does Your Church Believe in Conversion?"

"Does Your Church Believe in Conversion?"

WE ARE about the first generation that has considered it either respectable or safe not to be able to name the time and place of a religious experience, called conversion.

It has been thought of as the time when the first evidence is received that one has entered into a favorable relation with God. The facts which go with it are that men and God are out of relation; that all people are born so; that a life has no religious significance because out of divine favor until this experience comes; that one having gained this evidence is for the first time eligible to the Christian Church.

Churches have two general methods of restoring this lost relationship and making connection with God. Two different theories, with two ecclesiastical systems, are at work about us, differing in their method of restoring the lost relationship, but holding together that there is no relation with God at birth.

There is the cultivation or nurture method which takes children when they are infants and performs an act, infant baptism, which counteracts original sin and establishes a relation with God. Other acts, appropriate to the successive stages of childhood, improve and confirm this relationship established for them before individual choice could be made. This does have the advantage of making lives significant to God from birth and of religious meaning to themselves and the church. Many have chosen for them without their consent what they would not choose at

maturity if it were left to them. Certain tragic consequences which result from remaining in this godless state, in which one is born, are escaped by this nurture method and the rewards from being in favor with God are secured.

The other method agrees that life begins out of relation. It differs about the proper time to establish the right relation. It says that this getting right with God must be the act of a choosing mind. It cannot be done for one in infancy; it must be done, each one for himself. One must sense the full meaning of being out of God's favor and by his own will choose to escape this and get into favor. The logic of this seems to be that the first twelve or fifteen years of life must be helpless and hopeless. There is nothing to do but to wait for the years to come when choice can be made by a life mature enough to be convicted, feel guilt and choose the God who has not chosen him. This may be called the cataclysmic method. One as an adult is lifted out of an absolute state, not God's, into another absolute state, God's. All that he did before was without religious significance and rejected. The same things done after the change have significance and are accepted.

This second method, the cataclysmic, rather than the nurture method, has been the Protestant practice and the one more in favor in the United States. A method had to be developed for influencing people of some maturity to make this choice of God and be converted. The result was a system of soul rescue on a large scale, appealing at once to people in large num-

bers to make the great choice. The revival was for a long time the typical American institution. Before the average American community had a good school, library, civic or woman's club, it had a good revival. For generations it alone relieved the uneventful and commonplace life. Its actors were the only actors tolerated. Drama, tragedy, oratory, music, pleasure of assembly—it supplied them all. A class of professional soul winners was developed. Churches were rated and ministers advanced on the basis of success in soul rescue.

The system is everywhere the same and the order of procedure standardized. The end sought is a state of mind. A preparatory program extablishes a mood of expectancy. The individual is reduced to insignificance. The background is painted black. On a little isthmus, the present, stands the life, and this may sink at any moment. This isthmus joins two great continents of the dark. Back is God's condemnation; ahead, His perdition. "You are sinful, unworthy, sentenced from the start and you deserve it all. Whether you have walked uprightly or wallowed in the mud makes no difference. You are convicted and that conviction you must feel. There is nothing you can do." Into this darkness unrelieved, the mind reduced and the spirit humiliated, meriting the worst and deserving nothing, is shot one single ray of light, "See the Christ stand," the one beautiful figure in the tragedy. Then the signs appear that the saving process has begun. The evidences of real conviction and working of the spirit

have been varied. In the early days physical collapse was thought to be the best outward manifestation of the inward change. The report of the revival in Kentucky speaks of the church and campground being covered with the slain. Finney, in New England, said that he could not have overcome them more rapidly if he had used a sword. Edwards' congregations are described as being a senseless, helpless mass before him. In recent years these physical evidences have come into disfavor. The signs looked for now are varying degrees of mental agitation and a new moral order in the life.

We are dealing here with what purports to be human experience. The range of the possible is very wide and we cannot be dogmatic, nor argue that what has not come to us cannot be. We do know of a regular order from the first years to maturity, the life consciously living always up to the best that it knows. Many say it has been this way with them. Their relation to God has not come by observation or violence. They are like the earth which bringeth forth fruit of herself; first the blade, then the ear, then the full corn in the ear. They could name no time when they were troubled about their spiritual state; no time when an old relation, or no relation, was put off and a new, and the first, relation voluntarily and consciously entered upon. As far as we have the story of Jesus for this period of His life, His experience seems to have been of this nature. From childhood he increased in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and man.

Whether growing up with God or finding Him suddenly in a great life upheaval, whichever was meant to be the standard, the latter came to be sought as the genuine. Paul's experience in facing about and supporting all he had opposed before, was drawn upon for authority and carried weight with those not content to have an experience less than the most real. Each one must go through this; get this conviction that he has opposed all that is God's and has been just as bad as Paul; must turn right-about in the same way. Others, St. Augustine, Luther and many of lesser note, tell of their great agony of mind which terminated all at once in great relief and exaltation of spirit, with a new consciousness that God had accepted them.

Most of the men who bear this witness were troubled about certain religious doctrines which they took for facts. Suppose one had not been taught these doctrines and was not troubled about them, would such a sudden change come to him? That is, does one have this experience on the life side or the theological side of things? It now appears that such experiences are known to those who are not concerned in the least with dark doctrines about a dangerous state to be escaped. Human experience itself does know of life coming to, suddenly, and taking a new direction and a new attitude. New spirit, motive, purpose and resolution possess the life as they have not before. Something inside seems to waken, arouse itself and the life asleep and slack becomes open-eyed and tense. Great ideas and insight have

dawned as suddenly to inventors, philosophers, writers and artists. The author of one of the world's best known books tells of giddiness like that of intoxication and difficulty of breathing when the thought came which is central in the book. "All at once I felt dazzled by a thousand sparkling lights; crowds of vivid ideas thronged in my mind with a force and confusion which threw me into violent agitation." An American scientist has told us of the place and time when life opened for him and he entered in with a will. Another tells the day and hour when the conviction came that God would look after him as He does the stars. Another remembers vividly when, "All at once the vision came, I am a me, like a flash of light from heaven and ever afterward remained." These men were not troubled by theological matters as were Paul, St. Augustine and Luther. Life itself apart from theology knows this sudden, vivid, conscious birth into a new life.

Other circumstances confirm us in this conclusion that conversion is a part of life itself become confused with some matters of doctrine which have no necessary or vital connection and from which it should be separated. After several thousand have given their experience concerning conversion, a certain law of things begins to appear. One of the common warnings is that as the years increase the chances of having this experience decrease. This must strike us at once as very strange. It would seem that this knowledge that one is rejected of God would impress him more as he gets older. It

would seem that the cares and uncertainties of life would make middle life and old age the times when people in large numbers would try to get right with Him. After getting the evidence from a large number it is shown that this experience of conversion comes at about sixteen and one-half years. Knowing young life somewhat from having been through it once and having observed a number go through it, this, too, seems very strange. Knowing the rather care-free and hopeful attitude of life at this period, we are surprised that most are impressed at this time with some stern, grown-up doctrines about sin, salvation and death. We do not associate the gloomy thing with sixteen and one-half years.

Keeping in mind this strategic age, sixteen and one-half years, which theology finds best for her purposes, we leave the theology of the thing and go to the life of the thing. In doctrinal matters the what to do and when, to reach salvation, vary with the country and the accepted religion. In doctrine, men are taught different things and some are not taught any doctrine. But when we go to life itself we find people in all parts of the world going from infancy to maturity and old age in a certain order without regard to the prevailing religion.

Children are born; discover their hands and play with the rattle. They discover one room, then two, then the house. Once out in the yard they find that their house is just one of many on a long street. School expands their world until their street is seen

to be just one among many; their city one of many cities and the earth itself one of many spheres. So the world expands from the cradle sides to the infinite spaces of God. Somewhere in the awakening the greatest of all human discoveries is made, "I am myself, a being apart from all other persons in the world." For a long time all things and all people seem to exist just for us. All the life lines run one way, to us. Then life itself, as it is, begins to be felt vaguely and we see that we are not in it. New relations begin to be felt; new powers begin to push out. It comes to us that some one has to do all this work of the world and that we must connect, and assume this work relation to our fellows. There are other more intimate relations which gave us our being. Then it comes to us that we are a new generation and another must come from us just as we came from the one before. There are changes in body and in mind—boys coming to be men and girls coming to be women. Here is a law of life, an orderly development. A time comes when childish things and the first relation to the world are put aside and we enter into life not as a guest but as a participant and a host. There is here a strategic point when the old relation to the world is put off and the new put on, and this strategic point is about sixteen and one-half years. Life itself, wholly apart from theology, knows this age of change to new relations. It comes to us because we are made that way and not because of any doctrines, discouraging or hopeful, that we may have been taught. It is as we thought it

might prove to be; theology has claimed for her own a critical point which belongs to life itself.

There are certain prerequisite states of mind which are demanded as necessary accompaniment, seal and sign of conversion. We wish to miss nothing, neither do we wish to be deceived. How many of these states of mind are a part of life as it may be experienced today? As the average life comes to this period from a home generally wholesome, with a generally responsive conscience, with the cultivation and integrity of a very clean and decent kind of life—not many have been in the Reform School or before the Juvenile Court—how much that is said to be experienced, is experienced in fact? There are some stock phrases in the superlative degree bearing witness to a very shocking mental and spiritual condition suddenly become conscious. On the lips of Paul and St. Augustine these phrases named a hard truth for they did have much to forget and leave behind. There are, too, a few horrible examples who lay claim to the distinction of being the chief of sinners and we do not doubt them or deny their claim. We believe they feel this and they should. But when the average life, at the age when this experience comes, claims this distinction of being the chief of sinners, we do suspect that this is a phrase of a proper formula rather than the conviction of an improper life. That all people without regard to how they have lived should at a certain age feel that they are evenly and uniformly evil, as bad as the worst, must give us pause. It leads us to think that some vain repetitions may be at work here under the

law of suggestion and imitation. Here again we are lead to ask whether this is on the life side or the theology side of conversion.

Does one experience today that there is absolutely nothing good in him; that his whole mind is corrupt and his will vitiated because of what the first in the ancestral line did thousands of years before? This is not a matter of experience. By the rules of evidence it must be established. This is a historical fact or it is not. Does one experience that God is offended with him in this last generation for what some one did in the first; that God will not enter into relations with him; that in all the gloom there is just one life in all the millions that can bridge this gulf between the eternal God and man? These are historical facts or they are not, and we think they are not. We feel very sure that no human soul has experienced these things. Here we should not hesitate to place this on the theology side of the conversion experience.

On the life side we should place within the field of actual, present, human experience for each recurring generation, this: the first relation we establish with life cannot go on; it must come to an end and a new relation must be established. The old life, childish things and ways, must be put off as an outgrown garment. We look ourselves in the face and consciously take ourselves in hand. We come to ourselves and say, "I will arise and go." New motives arise within, and new allegiances claim us from with-

out. We gird our wills and say, "There is better than this." This changed front to the world might come after a long, studied process of reflection, after deep searchings of heart. Its intensity might be increased by the unworthiness of the life up to this point and by the degree of responsiveness to the new world of life that has come as the morning. It might come as the dawning of a great light, suddenly, lifting us into our new world with great assurance and great exaltation of spirit. As we go on we might drop down; lose our vision, goal and will and have to put off the old; condemn and renew ourselves again. We should feel ourselves poor if we could be lifted but once into the exalted mood by beautiful things in music, art and literature. Is the moral and spiritual life so poor that its power to give, and ours to feel, is exhausted by one renewal of our life and one glow of feeling for old ways put by and new entered upon?

On the life side then we find conversion covering a strategic life period which comes to all because they are human beings. Life's order from infancy to maturity makes this strategic period when childish things are left and new assumed. Without regard to the religion taught, this life change comes just the same. Religion is concerned with this period for the same reason that all other institutions and influences are concerned with it. It is the most receptive period because it is a confused, uncertain period. The life is not yet committed to any way but is casting about. Everyone who wishes us to choose a certain occupa-

tion, belong to his organization or be his kind of man, comes to us at this time. We are interested and we listen because we are looking for a way to take and are open to all suggestions. The technical and commercial schools, the colleges come just at this time asking us to commit our lives to them. In the same way, and for the same reason, religion comes at this time. Religion says, "While you are looking about for a way to take, look at this way. While you are uncommitted and looking for an allegiance worthy to claim you, look at this." Most people choose religion at this time because this is the choosing time of life which life itself has made. Religion comes in with all other claims to make her bid for the life. This is good; religion's right and duty. At this time when the stories of great lives and deeds begin for the first time to take hold of us, religion comes with the great lives lived and the great deeds done in her name and for her ends. At this time when a new attitude toward men is about to be chosen, and a new relation to the great world assumed, religion comes with her appeal to live with men in love under the eye of God and obedient to His will.

As a church, how much that is connected with conversion, do we believe? We believe all that belongs to life. Leaving out the bad start, the godless start; leaving out the terrible necessity of getting the great God to accept our lives and be friendly; leaving out the premises, conclusions and implications bound up in the fall of man and the sacrifice of a God for ransom, we believe in, rejoice in, all the processes that

belong to human experience. We know it is rich and varied. Though denied to us we would not circumscribe the workings of God in the human spirit to that which we have felt. Leaving out the doctrines bound up with it, which our thought of God and man says cannot be true of God and man, no one rejoices more in seeing lives early, at all times, once, many times, leave the old rooms of their house of life and enter into new rooms unoccupied before.

One may trudge along a lonely road, a lone pilgrim or he may join hands. There are always companies of people who mean what we mean and are bound to the same place we are going. Whatever new way one would walk in, it is easier to keep to the way in a company. Many say they find this is so. The church, this church, means to be just a company walking together, going on from a good beginning, bettering as they go, to a noble end. In this matter of putting on the new life perhaps it means just what you mean; does not mean the theology of the thing, which you condemn; does mean the life of the thing which you mean.